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# #jihad: Understanding Social Media as a Weapon<sup>1</sup>

Levi J. West

This article will argue that social media in the hands of terrorist groups constitutes a weapon, and has become increasingly capable of contributing to the facilitation of consequential harm against identified targets. In doing so it will first clarify the communicative nature of terrorist action and provide an overview of the various contributions made by jihadist strategists to the evolution of terrorist practice, and in particular the re-emergence of the practice of individual terrorism. It will then identify the intersection of individual terrorism and social media and the development and deployment of a *system of social media jihad*.<sup>2</sup> The article will explain the mechanisms by which terrorist groups exploit and deploy social media platforms, and inflict various harms, with a specific focus on individual and small cell terrorism in Western jurisdictions. Finally, a brief case study analysis of Anwar al-Awlaki will demonstrate the gravity with which governments have conceived of this problem, in part by highlighting the substantiveness of their responses.

The exploitation of information and communication systems by terrorist groups has always been a vital component of their operations. Communicating their ideological agendas has always constituted, and continues to constitute, a core purpose for undertaking terrorist violence. The use of social media by Islamic State (IS), and a range of other terrorist and violent non-state actors, represents the most recent evolution in the relationship between terrorist organisations, media platforms, and information and communications technology. This article will argue that social media offers, to those terrorist organisations that are effective in exploiting it, a specific capability to inflict substantive harm upon their adversaries. IS, through a combination of the incorporation of pragmatic jihadist strategic doctrine, the refinement of a novel and multifaceted narrative, and a willingness to permit a high degree of autonomy amongst its individual operatives in Western jurisdictions, have established themselves as the most proficient terrorist group deploying and exploiting social media. This deployment and exploitation serves to reinforce their narratives to multiple audiences, contributes to recruitment and radicalisation, and of most

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally presented at the symposium *Social Media and the Spectrum of Modern Conflict*, at Monash University, co-hosted by the School of Media, Film and Journalism and the Faculty of Arts, Monash University, and the Strategic Plans Branch of the Australian Army, 13 November 2015.

<sup>2</sup> This term is a specific reference to the doctrine authored by Abu Musab al-Suri. The chapters on military theory and organisational theory include the Arabic slogan *nizam, la tanzim* (system, not organisation), and are contained in the closing chapters of his *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*, available in English in Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al-Qaida Strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri* (London: Hurst & Company, 2007), pp. 347-484.

consequence to Western security agencies, is increasingly responsible for substantially contributing to terrorist attacks in Western countries.

The topic of IS's use of social media has received substantial articulation both in the scholarly literature and in broader analytical discourse. Valuable scholarly and analytical contributions to the discussion have focused on topics such as the quantum of output produced by IS,<sup>3</sup> specific purposes for which IS utilise social media,<sup>4</sup> or on usage by a particular cohort.<sup>5</sup> While there has been substantial literature on the subject of jihadism and the online environment broadly, and specifically in regards to social media,<sup>6</sup> Ingram's work is particularly valuable for contributing substantially to both conceptual understandings, and for the use of both Arabic and English language primary material.<sup>7</sup> This analysis, through the citation of select primary material, seeks to contribute to the broader conceptual body of work that is emerging in relation to terrorism and social media. In doing so, it provides an analysis of the mechanisms by which IS achieves effects through social media and, in the process, weaponises an otherwise relatively benign tool. Furthermore, it focuses on the development of a specific system for the facilitation of individual terrorism in the West. By exploring the manner in which IS use social media, and how these complementary processes contribute to the overall impact of IS's social media deployment, a more comprehensive understanding of their social media strategies is achieved, in particular those deployed for the purpose of operationalising strategic thinking related to individual jihadist terrorism. This analysis will be contextualised by an argument regarding the strategic thinking that pertains to individual jihad and how its fusion with social media results in a substantial alteration to the domestic terrorism and counter-terrorism ecosystem in Western jurisdictions.

The primary argument advanced here is that IS, through the deployment of English-language content that seeks to facilitate acts of individual terrorism, have developed a *system of social media jihad* that is specifically designed to result in *action* being undertaken by individual terrorists in Western jurisdictions. This system has proven increasingly capable of inflicting significant harms against IS targets in the West. The operative components of this system are contextualised by the broader multidimensional

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<sup>3</sup> J. M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter*, Analysis Paper no. 20 (Washington, DC: Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, March 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015), pp. 170-79.

<sup>5</sup> Jytte Klausen, 'Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 38 no. 1 (2015), pp. 1-22.

<sup>6</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Terrorism in Cyberspace: The Next Generation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Philip Seib and Dana M. Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media* (London, UK: Routledge, 2011); Thomas Rid and Marc Hecker, *War 2.0: Irregular Warfare in the Information Age* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Haroro J. Ingram, 'The Strategic Logic of Islamic State Information Operations', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 69, no. 6 (2015), pp. 729-52.

information campaigns of IS<sup>8</sup> as well as the now well-established and relatively refined jihadist master narrative which has been built and reinforced since 2001. Through the distribution, largely via social media,<sup>9</sup> of specifically designed content, IS is able to achieve operational penetration into jurisdictions well beyond its key area of operations, while also imposing significant costs upon the 'far enemy'. This article will argue that this system is the culmination of the principles of individual jihad conceived and articulated by Abu Musab al-Suri and others, articulated and propagated by Anwar al-Awlaki and others, and operationalised and made accessible via social media. Ultimately, this system effectively weaponises social media.

Prior to undertaking the substantive analytical component of this article it is necessary to identify the significance and centrality of communication to terrorism, and the role of various interpretations and manifestations of the maxim of *propaganda of the deed*. This maxim, generally attributed to Mikhail Bakunin,<sup>10</sup> is recognised as a significant component of modern terrorism. Undertaking acts of terrorist violence without consideration of how various audiences will be informed of the violence, and the necessarily embedded ideological component of the violence, limits greatly the utility of the action. For example, the beheading of Western journalist James Foley by IS in 2014, symbolically dressed in an orange jumpsuit reminiscent of those worn by inmates of Guantanamo Bay, would have had greatly diminished impact in the absence of video footage of the incident and, in particular, in the absence of open source distribution through online media.<sup>11</sup> Schmid articulates the spirit of this maxim, when he states that

Terrorism cannot be understood only in terms of violence. It has to be understood primarily in terms of propaganda. Violence and propaganda, however, have much in common. Violence aims at behaviour modification by coercion. Propaganda aims at the same by persuasion. Terrorism can be seen as a combination of the two. Terrorism, by using violence against one victim, seeks to coerce and persuade others. The immediate victim is merely instrumental...<sup>12</sup>

This instrumentality is essential to understanding why and how IS and other terrorist entities deploy social media and other communication tools. If terrorism is to be fully understood, particularly in its modern context, then a

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<sup>8</sup> Haroro J. Ingram, 'Three Traits of the Islamic State's Information Warfare', *The RUSI Journal*, vol. 159, no. 6 (2014), pp. 4-11.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that as of the time of writing, much Islamic State (IS) output is released via both Twitter and the encrypted application Telegram.

<sup>10</sup> The original quote is "we must spread our principles, not with words but with deeds, for this is the most popular, the most potent, and the most irresistible form of propaganda". Mikhail Bakunin, 'Letters to a Frenchman on the Present Crisis', (1870), in Sam Dolgoff (ed.), *Bakunin on Anarchy: Selected Works by the Activist-Founder of World Anarchism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), pp. 195-96.

<sup>11</sup> The 4 minute, 40 second video 'A Message to America' was distributed via social network Diaspora on 19 August 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Alex P. Schmid, 'Frameworks for Conceptualising Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2004), pp. 205-10.

fulsome understanding of how and why it interacts with social media is essential. Merely analysing the violent actions of groups such as IS provides a limited perspective on the phenomenon, and risks missing the broader ideational aspects of why a certain terrorist entity achieves a degree of traction and salience. While the conventional approach to terrorism analysis—involving a focus on characteristics such as tactics and targeting, leadership, or organisational structure—are essential and rightly prioritised, incorporating an analysis and understanding of the non-kinetic practices of terrorist entities is both necessary and worthwhile. This work seeks to highlight the linkages between the non-kinetic activities of terrorist organisations and certain manifestations of kinetic action.

It is also important in undertaking any analytical exercise to ensure that appropriate definitional boundaries are established, particularly as it pertains to key concepts underpinning the analysis. While the focus of this article does not necessitate significant engagement with the ongoing definitional questions regarding terrorism, it will seek to establish parameters for the discussion regarding social media, and regarding the notion of a weapon. It is possible to rely on existing definitions of both terms throughout this analysis. Social media, generally understood by reference to the two most prominent manifestations, namely Facebook and Twitter, can be better understood by utilising a conceptual definition. Ahlqvist et al. provide a definition of social media, which states that “social media refers to the interaction of people and also to creating, sharing, exchanging and commenting contents in virtual communities and networks”.<sup>13</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, the definition of weapon will be drawn from the work of Thomas Rid, who has contributed substantially to contemporary debates on cyber-related issues. In his article, ‘Cyber-Weapons’, he defines a weapon as “a tool that is used, or designed to be used, with the aim of threatening or causing physical, functional, or mental harm to structures, systems, or living things”.<sup>14</sup> These two definitions provide a platform upon which to build the analysis below, and provide a necessary reference point upon which to assess the claim that social media is deployed as a weapon by terrorist entities.

## A Global System of Online Radicalisation and Recruitment

IS and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) both utilise similar mechanisms to leverage the information environment. This section will describe the primary components of this activity, namely propaganda, recruitment, and decentralised command and control. In particular, it will highlight the synchronous manner in which the various activities complement

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<sup>13</sup> Toni Ahlqvist, Asta Bäck, Minna Halonen and Sirkka Heinonen, *Social Media Road Maps: Exploring the Futures Triggered by Social Media*, VTT Tiedotteita Research Notes 2545 (Vuorimiehentie: VTT [Valtion Teknillinen Tutkimuskeskus], 2008), p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Rid, ‘Cyber-Weapons’, *The RUSI Journal*, vol. 157, no. 1 (2012), p. 7.

each other, creating a complex whole more substantial than the individual components. Additionally, this section will make brief reference to the doctrine that underpins this action, and which provides guidance for the overall *system* which AQAP pioneered, and which IS have arguably mastered.

### A NOTE ON RADICALISATION AND MULTIFACETED COMPLEXITY

Radicalisation is recognised as being an inherently complex process that does not lend itself to simplistic or generalisable explanations, and is fundamentally context dependent. Horgan states that “involvement in terrorism is a complex psychosocial process”.<sup>15</sup> In relation to the role of the online environment and its part in the radicalisation process, Von Behr et al. noted that “the internet is not a substitute for in-person meetings but, rather, complements in-person communication”; however, they also noted that the online environment “does create more opportunities for radicalisation”.<sup>16</sup> Nothing in this analysis seeks to suggest that the deployment of social media by IS or any other terrorist group, in a sophisticated manner or otherwise, is likely to result, in and of itself, in the radicalisation of an individual to the extent that they engage in acts of terrorist violence.

### Al-Suri’s Strategy of Decentralisation

The strategic theory authored by Abu Mus’ab al-Suri, and articulated in the closing chapters of his tome *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*, is the intellectual basis that informs much of the contemporary manifestations of jihadist terrorism. The importance of al-Suri and his thinking to contemporary terrorism is articulated by Bourke, who states that:

If al-Awlaki was the propagandist who did most to shape today's threat against the West, and al-Zawahiri and al-Baghdadi are currently the most influential commanders, then al-Suri is the strategist of greatest relevance.<sup>17</sup>

Numerous authors on jihadism broadly, and on IS specifically, recognise the influence of al-Suri’s pre-eminence amongst jihadist strategic theorists. While Lia’s *Architect of Global Jihad*<sup>18</sup> and Ryan’s *Decoding al-Qaeda’s Strategy*<sup>19</sup> are the most comprehensive treatments of al-Suri’s strategic thought, a more focused body of work has begun to identify the influence

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<sup>15</sup> John Horgan, ‘From Profiles to *Pathways* and Roots to *Routes*: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism’, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 618, no. 1 (2008), pp. 80-94.

<sup>16</sup> Ines von Behr, Anais Reding, Charlie Edwards and Luke Gribbon, *Radicalisation in the Digital Era: The Use of the Internet in 15 Cases of Terrorism and Extremism* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2013); <[www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR400/RR453/RAND\\_RR453.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR400/RR453/RAND_RR453.pdf)> [Accessed 24 November 2015].

<sup>17</sup> Jason Bourke, *The New Threat from Islamic Militancy* (London: The Bodley Head, 2015), p. 164.

<sup>18</sup> Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad*.

<sup>19</sup> Michael W. S. Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda’s Strategy: The Deep Battle against America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

these ideas have had on IS. For example, Lister highlights the legacy of al-Suri's concepts regarding individual jihad,<sup>20</sup> while McCants identifies the less recognised importance of al-Suri's focus on the apocalypse and Islamic eschatology,<sup>21</sup> and Stern and Berger identify the founder of the original incarnation of IS, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, as being influenced by al-Suri. Atwan states in reference to al-Suri that "his prolific writings about tactics and the ideology of war still influence the online generation of jihadists, including the leaders of Islamic State".<sup>22</sup>

Further evidence of the influence of al-Suri can be found in the online magazine *Inspire*, published by AQAP, and distributed widely via the internet and social media. All excluding two of the fourteen editions of *Inspire* contain extracts from al-Suri's work in a section entitled 'The Jihadi Experiences'. Complementing the reproduction of al-Suri's strategic thought is the 'Open Source Jihad' section which seeks to operationalise much of al-Suri's thinking, and which can be found packaged into the 2013 publication *Lone Mujahid Pocketbook*.

At the core of al-Suri's thinking is a twofold process. First, is the abandonment of the traditional pyramid structured organisation for a decentralised system which seeks to enable individual and small cell operations. Second, is the empowerment and education of operatives and potential operatives. This overall model, which reflects the leaderless resistance model advocated by white supremacist Louis Beam,<sup>23</sup> is analysed at length in the jihadist context by authors such as Sageman,<sup>24</sup> and Ryan.<sup>25</sup> The parallels between al-Suri's proposed system of individual terrorism and the deployment of social media by IS are substantive. *Inspire* magazine and its successor, *Dabiq*, as the primary English-language publications by jihadist organisations seek in part to manifest the strategic, decentralised thinking of al-Suri. Social media—as a platform for the dissemination of propaganda and education in jihad; as a recruitment platform for drawing participants into jihad; and to facilitate and motivate those seeking to participate in individual and small cell operations, particularly within Western jurisdictions—is unique in its scope and reach. In the words of al-Suri himself:

The link ... is confined to the common aim, a common name, the common doctrinal jihadi program, and a comprehensive educational program,

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<sup>20</sup> Charles R. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (London: C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd, 2015), p. 67.

<sup>21</sup> Will McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York, US: St. Martins Press, 2015), p. 29.

<sup>22</sup> Abdel Bari Atwan, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate* (London: Saqi Books, 2015), p. 85.

<sup>23</sup> Louis Beam, 'Leaderless Resistance', *The Seditonist*, vol. 12 (1992), <[www.louisbeam.com/leaderless.htm](http://www.louisbeam.com/leaderless.htm)> [Accessed 24 November 2015].

<sup>24</sup> Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

<sup>25</sup> Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy*, pp. 193-255.



whereas the necessary programs and all the needed materials for the completion of their self-preparation are made available to them, so that they are informed of a clear and disciplined program for pursuing [jihadi] activities.<sup>26</sup>

The work of al-Suri is of importance to IS, and in particular to their development of a social media system for the purposes of inciting individuals within Western countries to undertake acts of individual jihadism. Jihadist strategy expert Michael Ryan has made the case extensively for the importance of both al-Suri's work and *The Management of Savagery* by Abu Bakr Naji to IS's overall strategic thinking, and has stated that "like the current al Qaeda organization, ISIS is influenced by two major jihadist authors, Abu Mus'ab al-Suri and Abu Bakr Naji".<sup>27</sup> Suggestions, for instance, that the ongoing competition between Jabhat al-Nusra (JN)<sup>28</sup> and IS, or the disavowing of IS by al-Qaeda (AQ) leader Ayman al-Zawahiri results in core strategic doctrine of the jihadist movement being disregarded are misplaced. Georgetown University's Bruce Hoffman has articulated this meta-influence and identifies a number of key arguments that suggest the similarities are far more substantial than the differences, and in particular points out that "the two groups embrace the same strategy".<sup>29</sup>

Contemporary jihadist use of social media is not the product of an organic, emergent process, but is best understood as the calculated and considered adoption of a platform ideally suited to the strategic and organisational approach undertaken by many contemporary jihadist entities. The synchronous distribution of material for the purposes of propaganda, recruitment, and decentralised command and control, operationalises the thinking of al-Suri, and suits the objectives of groups such as IS in relation to targeting the West. A capacity to achieve multiple objectives through a variety of complementary content types provides efficiencies to groups which possess relatively limited resources and lack traditional broadcasting capability.

## PROPAGANDA

A predominant purpose for which social media platforms are utilised is the distribution of propaganda. All other aspects of online strategy depend on this, in that it provides meaning and context to all other forms of content.

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<sup>26</sup> Al-Suri, *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*, cited in Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad*, p. 445.

<sup>27</sup> Michael W. S. Ryan, *ISIS: The Terrorist Group That Would be a State*, Case Study (Newport: Naval War College, Center on Irregular Warfare and Armed Groups, 2015), p. 8; <[www.usnwc.edu/getattachment/Departments---Colleges/Center-on-Irregular-Warfare---Armed-Groups/Publications/ISIS\\_-Michael-W--S--Ryan-Final.pdf.aspx](http://www.usnwc.edu/getattachment/Departments---Colleges/Center-on-Irregular-Warfare---Armed-Groups/Publications/ISIS_-Michael-W--S--Ryan-Final.pdf.aspx)> [Accessed 24 November 2015].

<sup>28</sup> At the time of writing, Jabhat al-Nusra have declared that they have disaffiliated from al-Qaeda, and are now known by the name Jabhat Fath al-Sham, and will be focused solely on Syria.

<sup>29</sup> Bruce Hoffman, 'The Coming ISIS-al Qaeda Merger', *Foreign Affairs*, 29 March 2016, <[www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-03-29/coming-isis-al-qaeda-merger](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-03-29/coming-isis-al-qaeda-merger)> [Accessed 10 August 2016].



The distribution of propaganda by terrorist entities is neither novel nor revolutionary; however, the use of social media constitutes a substantial evolution of propaganda distribution capabilities. What social media facilitates is the perpetual distribution of audio, video and static content on an unprecedented scale, enabling the establishment and reinforcement of a master narrative. This narrative provides context, meaning and purpose to the violence undertaken by a terrorist group. Berger and Morgan conservatively estimate that between September and December of 2014, IS had some 46,000 Twitter support accounts,<sup>30</sup> and Berger has estimated that there are something in the vicinity of 200,000 tweets per day being generated by both the official and supporting IS accounts.<sup>31</sup> This retweeting is important as it decentralises the distribution capability, enabling resilience and broader audience penetration. The role of this global distribution capability in establishing and reinforcing the IS narrative is crucial in providing an overarching sense of meaning and purpose to those acts of violence undertaken in the name of IS specifically, or by those with more tenuous commitment to a specific organisation but a broad subscription to the overall jihadist narrative. The importance and sophistication of the narrative that is told via social media is important to the overall perception of IS, but also plays a key role in informing the recruitment process, and contextualising individual and small cell jihadist operations.

Effective propaganda depends substantially on an effective narrative. In the absence of an established and broadly understood narrative, propaganda's impacts are less impactful than they otherwise might be.<sup>32</sup> The substantive advantage that IS possess is the fifteen years of narrative development that has taken place since the attacks on the United States in September 2001. In the period since these incidents, there has been consistent messaging by al-Qaeda, and a diversity of other entities supportive of jihadist ideas, that has led to a set of well-established, well-understood symbols pertaining to jihadism, particularly in the West. Additionally, to the audiences of IS in the Arab and Islamic world, their propaganda draws on a master narrative<sup>33</sup> which is much broader and harks back to the so-called 'Golden Age of Islam', while citing the broad swathe of historical experience, largely through a lens of oppression and defeat.<sup>34</sup> The propaganda machine of IS, and its use of social media as its means of distribution, communicates this master narrative through all its external communications, and it supports the various purposes for which the propaganda is distributed. The management of what

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<sup>30</sup> Berger and Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>31</sup> Jon Greenberg, 'Does the Islamic State Post 90,000 Social Media Messages each Day?', 19 February 2015, <[www.politifact.com/punditfact/statements/2015/feb/19/hillary-mann-leverett/cnn-expert-islamic-state-posts-90000-social-media/](http://www.politifact.com/punditfact/statements/2015/feb/19/hillary-mann-leverett/cnn-expert-islamic-state-posts-90000-social-media/)> [Accessed 24 November 2015].

<sup>32</sup> Kenneth Payne, 'Winning the Battle of Ideas: Propaganda, Ideology, and Terror', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 32, no. 2 (2009), pp. 109-28.

<sup>33</sup> Jeffry R. Halverson, H. Lloyd Goodall and Steven R. Corman, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 13-14.

<sup>34</sup> Weimann, *Terrorism in Cyberspace*, pp. 197-98.

effectively constitutes a global brand is a powerful weapon, capable of causing substantial harm through both recruitment and inspiration. As detailed in the 2015 Global Terrorism Index,

strategic messaging and use of media as a psychological weapon in war is used tactically to magnify its power, attract foreign fighters and new citizens, and win greater economic resources. It has not only populated social media platforms but has attracted a global network of supporters that articulate, magnify and circulate its violent extremist messages worldwide.<sup>35</sup>

This body of propaganda contains both overt and more subtle references to, and justifications for, individual jihadist actions. The September 2014 audio release by IS spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, entitled 'Indeed, Your Lord is Ever Watchful', is an example of the type of overt call for individual jihadist terrorism within Western jurisdictions. In the three month period after this release, seven individual jihadist terrorist attacks took place in Western countries, including the attack on two law enforcement officers in Melbourne by Numan Haider, only two days after the release.

The deployment of propaganda, both for the purpose of reinforcing the IS narrative, and for more specific targeting and incitement purposes, causes significant harm to a multitude of target audiences. The overall impacts of propaganda on both the specific audience that it seeks to either radicalise to join IS in theatre, or that it seeks to radicalise to commit acts of individual jihadist terrorism within their country, are substantial. The broader impacts on the families and communities from which these individuals are drawn and the costs imposed on the governments responsible for them further advance the objectives of IS. The costs imposed on the targets of the actions taken are in many cases fatal.

## RECRUITMENT

In addition to propaganda distribution for broader communicative and intimidation purposes, IS uses social media to communicate with potential recruits to its cause. An estimated 30,000 foreign fighters have entered Syria and Iraq since 2011.<sup>36</sup> The deployment of refined, contextualised and targeted content has been a component of recruiting, in particular of Western foreign fighters. As explained by Gates and Podder, IS recruitment via social media involves content that

tends to use video rather than text, takes full advantage of the linguistic skills of members (sometimes translating statements and videos into European languages), and makes good use of music...<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2015* (New York: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2015), p. 77.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> Scott Gates and Sukanya Podder, 'Social Media, Recruitment, Allegiance and the Islamic State', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2015), p. 109.

The power and subtlety of recruitment content can be witnessed in video releases such as July 2014's *Join the Ranks*,<sup>38</sup> in Bahasa, with Indonesian fighters encouraging Indonesians to come and participate. Additionally, videos such as the June 2014 *There is No Life without Jihad*,<sup>39</sup> featuring British and Australian fighters, demonstrate specific audience targeting. Producing content in a diversity of languages remains a powerful tool for IS. Social media provides an interactive and dynamic platform that enables targeted distribution of fit-for-purpose content to specific audiences.

Beyond the pitch for foreign fighters, IS have diversified their recruitment drives and sought to appeal to a range of potential recruits for civilian roles. In his first public comments after establishing the caliphate, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed Caliph of the Islamic State, called for a range of professionals to participate in the State-building component of the caliphate. In his statements he called for

scholars, fuqahaa' [Islamic jurisprudence experts], and preachers, especially the judges, as well as people with military, administrative, and service expertise, and medical doctors and engineers of all different specializations and fields.<sup>40</sup>

The appeal and salience of this articulation of the narrative, focusing on the state-building aspect rather than solely the military is evidenced by the high profile case of Tareq Kamleh, the Australian doctor who moved to Syria to work in a hospital.<sup>41</sup> In addition to this there is the case of nine British medics who entered Syria to work in hospitals there,<sup>42</sup> as well as reports of targeted recruitment by IS in Uzbekistan, particularly of doctors.<sup>43</sup> In the Uzbekistan case it is worth noting that in addition to the IS release of the video featuring Tareq Kamleh, and announcing the establishment of the Islamic State Health Service, a concurrent recruitment call was issued by a

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<sup>38</sup> 'Indonesian Fighter Promotes IS, Calls to Join Its Ranks in IS Video', SITE Intelligence Group, 22 July 2014, <ent.siteintelgroup.com/Multimedia/indonesian-fighter-promotes-is-calls-to-join-its-ranks-in-is-video.html> [Accessed 25 November 2015].

<sup>39</sup> 'Australian, British Nationals Incite for Participation in Jihad in ISIS Video', SITE Intelligence Group, 19 June 2014, <ent.siteintelgroup.com/Multimedia/australian-british-nationals-incite-for-participation-in-jihad-in-isis-video.html> [Accessed 25 November 2015].

<sup>40</sup> A. Agron, 'Wanted: Western Professionals to Join the Islamic State (ISIS)', Jihad and Terrorism Threat Monitor, Inquiry & Analysis Series, No. 1159, Middle East Media Research Institute, 15 May 2015, <www.memrijtm.org/wanted-western-professionals-to-join-the-islamic-state-isis.html#\_edn1> [Accessed 25 November 2015].

<sup>41</sup> Clark Jones and Greg Barton, 'New-look IS Video with Perth Doctor Tareq Kamleh but Same Old Radicalisation Techniques', *The Age*, 28 April 2015.

<sup>42</sup> Marga Zambrana, Hazar Aydemir and Emma Graham-Harrison, 'Nine British Medics Enter Isis Stronghold to Work in Hospitals', *The Guardian*, 22 March 2015.

<sup>43</sup> Joanna Paraszcuk, 'Is IS Recruiting Doctors from Uzbekistan?', Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 8 September 2015, <www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-uzbekistan-recruiting-doctors/27233287.html> [Accessed 25 November 2015].

Chechen fighter, via the Russian social-networking site VKontakte.<sup>44</sup> The use of both specific languages and culturally affiliated fighters, as well as utilising target audience centric platforms, demonstrates the sophistication of the effort by IS.

Further to the broader recruitment effort, and demonstrating the overall synchronised effort of IS output, the third edition of *Dabiq*, entitled *A Call to Hijrah*, specifically appealed to a range of professionals, declaring that the IS project was in need of “experts, professionals, and specialists, who can help contribute in strengthening its structure and tending to the needs of their Muslim brothers”.<sup>45</sup> The theme of *hijrah*<sup>46</sup> is used extensively in IS recruitment materials and is portrayed as an obligation. By linking the recruitment argument back to aspects of the master narrative portrayed across the full spectrum of IS propaganda, the recruitment process builds on already established propositions and assumptions conveyed through other content. This integrated approach greatly strengthens the capability of the material being distributed, and increases the capacity to recruit fighters, but also a broader spectrum of participants to the conflict.

The physical and mental harm on both the specific targets of the recruitment effort and the broader society from which they are drawn, and potentially return to, is significant. It is evidenced by the measures that nation states have undertaken,<sup>47</sup> as well as multilateral organisations such as the United Nations.<sup>48</sup> The secondary harm that foreign fighters inflict both whilst active, but also beyond the conflict further extends the harmful impacts of this aspect of the IS social media weapon.

### DECENTRALISED COMMAND AND CONTROL

The title of the AQAP’s online magazine speaks to the mechanism by which contemporary jihadist entities seek to facilitate operations beyond their immediate geographic reach. Through social media they are able to easily distribute material that is specifically designed to ‘inspire’ al-Suri’s individual and small cell jihadist, as well as reaching a broader range of potential recruits. It is this process that most clearly weaponises social media and

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<sup>44</sup> Joanna Paraszczuk, ‘IS Recruiting Medics for Battlefield First Aid, Treating Foreign Militants’, Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 26 April 2015, <[www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-call-for-medics-doctors-battlefield/26979105.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-call-for-medics-doctors-battlefield/26979105.html)> [Accessed 25 November 2015].

<sup>45</sup> *Dabiq*, vol. 3 (Al-Hayat Media Center, September 2014).

<sup>46</sup> According to the Oxford University Dictionary of Islam, *hijrah* generally refers to migration or withdrawal. It typically refers to the migration of Muhammad and his Companions from Mecca to Medina in 622 C.E., the first year in the Islamic calendar, and symbolises the willingness to suffer for faith and the refusal to lose hope in the face of persecution.

<sup>47</sup> Library of Congress, ‘Treatment of Foreign Fighters in Selected Jurisdictions: Country Surveys’, <[www.loc.gov/law/help/foreign-fighters/country-surveys.php](http://www.loc.gov/law/help/foreign-fighters/country-surveys.php)> [Accessed 27 November 2015].

<sup>48</sup> United Nations Security Council Committee on Counter-Terrorism, ‘UN Documents on Foreign Fighters’, <[www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/news/2015-03-11\\_UN\\_documents\\_FTF.html](http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/news/2015-03-11_UN_documents_FTF.html)> [Accessed 27 November 2015].

has the most direct link to harm. Through the decentralised distribution of the pertinent components of an entire, integrated and synchronised system designed to provide all the necessary permissions, guidance and inspiration, jihadist entities are able to reach into Western jurisdictions and have tangible effect. Ryan encapsulate this process and argues that this aspect of the system is

the real basis for al-Suri's *Call to Global Islamic Resistance*, the end point of his theory. It contains individuals and small units that are prepared and ready to devote themselves to terrorism ... propaganda and recruiting is intended to *inspire individual jihadists to strike priority targets identified by the disconnected and hidden leadership as strategic prizes...*<sup>49</sup>

It would be simplistic to argue causal relationships between the distribution of radicalisation material via social media and the actions of the individuals who have undertaken the plethora of individual or small cell terrorist operations that have occurred in Western countries since 2009.<sup>50</sup> However, an overwhelming majority of these cases have demonstrated substantial engagement with online jihadist material in varying forms. In the case of the Boston bombings, the surviving Tsarnaev brother confessed to investigators that he and his brother had obtained instructions for their pressure cooker bombs from *Inspire* magazine.<sup>51</sup> A substantial number of these incidents involved the operatives accessing via social media a diversity of jihadist material. Additionally, the tactics used and the targeting decisions made are in keeping with the suggestions and guidance provided by the jihadist movement broadly, through their online magazines and a multitude of video and audio releases. Overwhelmingly, this content is distributed via tweeted links. In a recognition of the substantive refinements that IS have made to the system originally deployed by AQAP through *Inspire*, there were nine individual or small cell jihadist attacks in the West prior to the release of al-Adnani's *Indeed, Your Lord is Ever Watchful* in September 2014, which occurred only one month after the beheading of James Foley, and only three months after the declaration of the Caliphate and the associated re-branding of IS. In the aftermath of the declaration of the Caliphate and the release of

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<sup>49</sup> Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy*, p. 245 (emphasis added).

<sup>50</sup> Little Rock Recruitment Centre shooting; Fort Hood shooting; Stockholm bombings; Frankfurt Airport shooting; Toulouse and Montauban shootings; Boston bombings; Woolwich stabbing; La Défense stabbing; Jewish Museum of Belgium shooting; Endeavour Hills stabbing; Vaughan Foods beheading; Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu ramming attack; Ottawa Parliament Hill shooting; Queens hatchet attack; Sydney siege; Joue-les-Tours stabbing; Charlie Hebdo shootings and Dammartin-en-Goële hostage crisis; Fontenay-aux-Roses and Montrouge shootings and Porte de Vincennes siege; Copenhagen shootings; Saint-Quentin-Fallavier attack; Chattanooga shootings; Parramatta shooting; Marseille teacher stabbing; Sarajevo shooting; San Bernardino shooting; Paris attempted meat cleaver attack; Philadelphia police shooting; University of California stabbing; Marseilles teacher stabbing; Orlando shooting; Facebook streamed police stabbing; Ansbach suicide bombing; Wurzburg train stabbings; Rouen priest killing.

<sup>51</sup> Michael Isikoff, Pete Williams and Erin Mcclam, 'Search of Tsarnaevs' Phones, Computers Finds no Indication of Accomplice, Source Says', NBC News, 23 April 2013, <[usnews.nbcnews.com/\\_news/2013/04/23/17877288-search-of-tsarnaevs-phones-computers-finds-no-indication-of-accomplice-source-says?lite](http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/04/23/17877288-search-of-tsarnaevs-phones-computers-finds-no-indication-of-accomplice-source-says?lite)> [Accessed 25 November 2015].

this audio command, there have been approximately twenty-five attacks of the same nature.<sup>52</sup>

It is important here to recognise the influence of Anwar al-Awlaki, who is generally regarded as having effectively operationalised and popularised al-Suri's ideas of individual, decentralised jihad. Through his English language content and web savvy distribution methods, Al-Awlaki made these concepts accessible to those who lacked Arabic language skills or a sophisticated understanding of Islamic theology. Al-Awlaki provides this audience with a 'pop' version of the justifications for jihadist violence that has been built on by IS through the production of *Dabiq*, but also through the distribution of a multitude of outputs in English and in other non-Arabic languages.

There are instances that have begun to demonstrate more direct relationships between social media calls for action and operational outcomes. The incident that occurred at the Curtis Culwell Center in Garland, Texas, where two operatives unsuccessfully attacked a cartoon competition focused on depicting Mohammed is a useful example. In this incident, numerous IS-sympathetic twitter users had been calling for attacks on the cartoon competition. Tweets issued in the days prior to the attack such as "Brothers in Garland Texas Please go to there with your weapons, bombs or with your knives. Threaten your enemies & the enemies of Allaah" and "I think thy forgt the previous attack done by our french bros, walahi we wil kill u if u dare to insult our Prophet"<sup>53</sup> were designed to encourage individuals or small cells to launch violent operations on the cartoon competition. Directly referencing and leveraging the post-incident atmosphere of the Charlie Hebdo attacks provided additional weight to the call for action. Immediately prior to the attack, one of the operatives, who maintained an active Twitter presence and engaged with IS supporters via social media, tweeted a pledge of allegiance to IS on behalf of himself and his co-conspirator. His tweet read "The bro with me and myself have given bay'ah to Amirul Mu'mineen. May Allah accept us as mujahideen fighters. Make dua #texasattack".<sup>54</sup> Half an hour after this tweet the two operatives launched their failed attack on the Culwell Center, being killed in the process. Immediately following the incident, high profile jihadist Twitter user Junaid Hussein retweeted the operatives pledge of allegiance, as well as an IS claim of responsibility, which stated "2 of our brothers just opened fire at the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) art exhibition in texas, They Thought They

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<sup>52</sup> Counting these types of operations is an imperfect exercise as, in some instances, motivations and intent are unclear. The attacks cited here reflect tactics and targets suggested by jihadist material. In a majority of the cases some form of digital evidence has suggested an affinity with jihadist ideology.

<sup>53</sup> Anti-Defamation League, 'Alleged Garland Shooter Indicated His Intent Online', 4 May 2015, <[blog.adl.org/extremism/alleged-garland-shooter-elton-simpson-isis-shabaab-twitter](http://blog.adl.org/extremism/alleged-garland-shooter-elton-simpson-isis-shabaab-twitter)> [Accessed 25 November 2015].

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.



Was Safe In Texas From The Soldiers of The Islamic State".<sup>55</sup> His further tweets made reference to the attack and used #texasattack, which the operative had been savvy enough to include in his original tweet of allegiance. The attack was subsequently celebrated in an al-Bayan news bulletin of 5 May,<sup>56</sup> and in the ninth edition of *Dabiq* magazine<sup>57</sup> published later that month.

The decentralised approach of al-Suri's system is exemplified in the audio release by al-Adnani, cited earlier,<sup>58</sup> which specifies a broad list of Western nationalities as permissible targets, including military and law enforcement personnel, as well as civilians. The speaker provides potential operatives with a broad range of permissible tactics, all of which are low risk from an operational security perspective, requiring limited resources and minimal capability. Significantly, al-Adnani commands that potential operatives do not require specific authorisation or advice, providing ongoing religious permissibility to likely operatives. It is in this aspect of the overall social media effort that harm becomes most directly linked to online content. By linking tactical and targeting suggestions, as well as religious permission into an ongoing overall master narrative that seeks to justify and encourage actions, both religiously and politically, jihadist groups have effectively been able to undertake in-country operations with minimal risk and maximum impact. Through social media, jihadist entities successfully achieve harm and disruption that would otherwise incur much greater risk, and offer greater likelihood of disruption or interdiction.

## Encryption and System Improvements

The weaponised use of social media by terrorist groups has been an aspect of their operations for some time. Terrorist organisations are adaptive by their nature, and have effectively sought to find solutions to the exposure that unencrypted communications presents. Increasingly, terrorists and terrorist entities are utilising encrypted platforms, such as Telegram, Surespot or Kik, as their primary means of communication.<sup>59</sup> In addition to

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<sup>55</sup> Site Intelligence Group, 'IS Fighter Forwards Alleged Claim of Shooting in Texas', <ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/is-fighter-forwards-alleged-claim-of-shooting-in-texas.html> [Accessed 25 November 2015].

<sup>56</sup> Site Intelligence Group, 'IS Claims Texas Shooting, Identifies Perpetrators as "Soldiers of the Caliphate"', <ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/is-claims-texas-shooting-identifies-perpetrators-as-soldiers-of-the-caliphate.html> [Accessed 25 November 2015].

<sup>57</sup> Site Intelligence Group, 'IS Releases Issue 9 of English Magazine "Dabiq," Calls Texas Shooting "Inspiration"', <ent.siteintelgroup.com/Periodicals/is-releases-9th-issue-of-english-magazine-dabiq-calls-texas-shooting-as-inspiration.html> [Accessed 25 November 2015].

<sup>58</sup> Site Intelligence Group, 'IS Spokesman Rallies Fighters against U.S.-Led Coalition, Threatens Enemy and Calls Individual Muslims to Launch Attacks', 21 September 2014, <ent.siteintelgroup.com/Multimedia/is-spokesman-rallies-fighters-against-u-s-led-coalition-threatens-enemy-and-calls-individual-muslims-to-launch-attacks.html> [Accessed 25 November 2015].

<sup>59</sup> 'Islamic State Prioritise Telegram App to Spread Propaganda', BBC News, 9 October 2015, <www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34478695> [Accessed 25 November 2015].



the diversity of platforms available to terrorists and terrorist entities for their communication, various individuals have authored guides and provided advice on the merits or otherwise of various platforms and applications.<sup>60</sup> IS have gone as far as co-opting and distributing a manual authored by a cybersecurity firm to advise journalists on protecting their identity.<sup>61</sup> The manual<sup>62</sup> provides advice and access to a range of products and services that assist in encrypting communication, but also in maintaining anonymity online, and for secure data storage. According to Stalinsky and Sosnow,

Since January 2015, followers of ISIS and other jihadi groups have been advertising their Kik and Surespot, and also Wickr account information in their other social media accounts, largely Twitter. This phenomenon has expanded exponentially, especially for Western supporters.<sup>63</sup>

This adaptability, and increased awareness of the vulnerability of conventional social media platforms enables terrorist entities to remain ahead of law enforcement and intelligence agencies in their communications. Increasingly, social media is reserved for propaganda distribution, which by its nature is open and public, while platforms such as Twitter are used to provide details on how to access encrypted platforms.<sup>64</sup> This shift represents a substantial alteration in the counter-terrorism environment, and presents substantial challenges to authorities seeking to counter the range of terrorism-related outcomes that social media are deployed to promote.

### **Anwar al-Awlaki: Propagandist *par excellence***

In seeking to identify the gravity of the problem analysed above, it is worth briefly discussing the case of Anwar al-Awlaki. Al-Awlaki can be described as a contemporary, digital propagandist *par excellence*. The measures that his government undertook in seeking to neutralise his capabilities were significant in providing an indication of the seriousness and gravity given to those individuals who play substantive roles in the operational aspects of the online terrorism environment. Al-Awlaki was a citizen of the United States, and the decision to undertake lethal action against him was not risk or controversy free. The preparedness to wear the political fallout, and the possible legal challenges post fact, further evidences the dangers attributed to weaponised social media in the hands of terrorists. Al-Awlaki was an

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<sup>60</sup> Steven Stalinsky and R. Sosnow, 'Encryption Technology Embraced By ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Other Jihadis Reaches New Level With Increased Dependence On Apps, Software—Kik, Surespot, Telegram, Wickr, Detekt, TOR: Part IV—February-June 2015', MEMRI, 16 June 2015, <[www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/8610.htm](http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/8610.htm)> [Accessed 25 November 2015].

<sup>61</sup> Kim Zetter, 'Security Manual Reveals the OPSEC Advice ISIS Gives Recruits', *Wired*, 19 November 2015, <[www.wired.com/2015/11/isis-opsec-encryption-manuals-reveal-terrorist-group-security-protocols/](http://www.wired.com/2015/11/isis-opsec-encryption-manuals-reveal-terrorist-group-security-protocols/)> [Accessed 25 November 2015].

<sup>62</sup> 'Several Cyber Security to Protect Your Account in the Social - :Networking Twitter', 14 September 2015, <[www.wired.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ISIS-OPSEC-Guide.pdf](http://www.wired.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ISIS-OPSEC-Guide.pdf)>.

<sup>63</sup> Stalinsky and Sosnow, 'Encryption Technology Embraced By ISIS'.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

English speaking, self-styled jihadist preacher and American citizen who has been implicated, to greater or lesser degrees, in numerous domestic terrorist plots and attacks in the West. As former Director of Research at West Point's Combating Terrorism Center, Jarret Brachman, commented in 2012,

Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan would not have been able to accomplish what they did without Suri's body of work ... But he was painting by number on a worksheet that had been already drafted by Suri.<sup>65</sup>

The influence that Al-Awlaki has had on AQAP-inspired terrorists has been substantially detailed elsewhere<sup>66</sup> but his influence on IS-related terrorism is less direct and informed more by the narrative that he delivered, the accessibility of his work, both in terms of language and the online format in which it is archived, and the operationalisation of al-Suri's strategic thought. Hoffman has stated in reference to Al-Awlaki's particular form of supra-influence that he "has a timeless and even universal message of radicalization and resistance that is completely separate to whatever organization he hitched his fortunes to".<sup>67</sup>

Al-Awlaki's specific impact on terrorism, particularly in the West, is substantial. He is understood to have had substantial email correspondence and influence on Nidal Hassan, the Fort Hood shooter, and with Umar Farouq Abdulmutallab, who attempted to blow up a Detroit-bound plane in 2009.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, al-Awlaki is alleged to have inspired Faizal Shahzad, who attempted to detonate a car bomb in Times Square, New York,<sup>69</sup> and Mohammad Youssef Abdulazee, who undertook a shooting at a military recruitment centre in 2015.<sup>70</sup> His influence has been linked to the San Bernardino shooting,<sup>71</sup> and to the Charlie Hebdo attack in France.<sup>72</sup> A recent study surveyed 287 jihadist plots since 2007 and found al-Awlaki's presence, in varying manifestations, in 65 of them. Karen Greenberg, Director of the Fordham Law School's Center on National Security, stated that

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<sup>65</sup> Jarret Brachman, 'Abu-Musab al-Suri—Released?', 11 January 2012, <jarretbrachman.net/abu-musab-al-suri-released/> [Accessed 10 August 2016].

<sup>66</sup> Scott Shane, *Objective Troy: A Terrorist, a President, and the Rise of the Drone* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2015).

<sup>67</sup> Bruce Hoffman, cited in Greg Miller, 'Al-Qaeda Figure Seen As Key Inspiration for San Bernardino Attacker', *The Washington Post*, 18 December 2015, <www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/al-qaeda-figure-seen-as-key-inspiration-for-san-bernardino-attacker/2015/12/18/f0e00d80-a5a0-11e5-9c4e-be37f66848bb\_story.html> [Accessed August 2016].

<sup>68</sup> Abdel Bari Atwan, *After Bin Laden: Al Qaeda, the Next Generation* (New York: The New Press, 2012), p. 97.

<sup>69</sup> Scott Shane and Mark Mazzetti, 'Times Sq. Bomb Suspect Is Linked to Militant Cleric', *New York Times*, 6 May 2010, <www.nytimes.com/2010/05/07/world/middleeast/07awlaki-.html> [Accessed 25 November 2015].

<sup>70</sup> Chattanooga Shooter Listened to Awlaki, *The Daily Beast*, 21 July 2015, <www.thedailybeast.com/cheats/2015/07/21/tn-shooter-listened-to-radical-cleric.html> [Accessed 25 November 2015].

<sup>71</sup> Miller, 'Al-Qaeda Figure Seen As Key Inspiration for San Bernardino Attacker'.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

His influence is laced through these cases in a way that is more powerful in the aggregate than is readily apparent in individual cases and that has enabled his influence to last way beyond his death...<sup>73</sup>

During the parliamentary inquiry into the death of Lee Rigby in 2013, British intelligence agencies provided written testimony that commented on the operational impacts of Al-Awlaki's *Inspire* magazine, while noting that it was one of numerous publications available online.

[W]e can now say that Inspire has been read by those involved in at least seven out of the ten attacks planned within the UK since its first issue [in 2010]. We judge that it significantly enhanced the capability of individuals in four of these ten attack plots...<sup>74</sup>

The nature of the online environment and of social media has greatly enhanced the capacity of charismatic individuals such as Al-Awlaki to have significant impacts well beyond their deaths. Increasingly, Al-Awlaki's influence beyond AQAP-affiliated terrorists or even AQ-affiliated terrorists is being witnessed. For example, Syed Farook, one of the shooters in the San Bernardino attack of December 2015, had consumed lectures by al-Awlaki and materials informed by al-Awlaki's ideas. Shortly after the attack, Tashfeen Malik, Farook's wife and the other shooter in the attack, pledged allegiance to IS on their behalf via Facebook.<sup>75</sup> This phenomenon of transcending specific organisational affiliation and only evidencing surface level understanding of the broader ideological content that seeks to justify jihadist terrorism is increasingly common, and has been evidenced by many of the Western foreign fighters who have travelled to join IS, as well as many of those undertaking attacks in the name of IS. Bruce Riedel, a former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) analyst and Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, captures this phenomena eloquently when he states that

I think you can be a supporter of Awlaki and Baghdadi at the same time ... the difference matters a lot if you are in Syria. I don't think it matters that much when you are in San Bernardino or Paris.<sup>76</sup>

Al-Awlaki's simplified operational model of al-Suri's strategic and organisational theory has shaped the contemporary jihadist milieu

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<sup>73</sup> Robert Windrem, 'Dead Cleric Anwar al-Awlaki Still Sways Terror Wannabes', NBC News, 25 July 2015, <[www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/dead-cleric-anwar-al-awlaki-still-sways-terror-wannabes-n397506](http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/dead-cleric-anwar-al-awlaki-still-sways-terror-wannabes-n397506)> [Accessed 22 November 2015].

<sup>74</sup> Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, *Report on the Intelligence Relating to the Murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby* (London: William Lea Group, 2014), p. 60. <[isc.independent.gov.uk/files/20141125\\_ISC\\_Woolwich\\_Report\(website\).pdf](http://isc.independent.gov.uk/files/20141125_ISC_Woolwich_Report(website).pdf)> [Accessed 20 November 2015].

<sup>75</sup> United States Department of Justice, 'Riverside Man Charged with Conspiring to Provide Material Support to Terrorism, as well as Being 'Straw Purchaser' of Assault Rifles Later Used in San Bernardino Attack that Killed 14', 17 December 2015, <[www.justice.gov/usao-cdca/pr/riverside-man-charged-conspiring-provide-material-support-terrorism-well-being-straw](http://www.justice.gov/usao-cdca/pr/riverside-man-charged-conspiring-provide-material-support-terrorism-well-being-straw)> [Accessed July 2016].

<sup>76</sup> Bruce Riedel, quoted in Miller, 'Al-Qaeda Figure Seen as Key Inspiration for San Bernardino Attacker'.

substantially. His importance both specifically in regards to AQAP and plots associated with that organisation, but more importantly to the overall jihadist movement, is difficult to overstate. In response, al-Awlaki was removed from the battlefield by a Hellfire missile, launched from an American operated Predator drone in Yemen on 30 September 2011. Regardless of the justified or otherwise nature of this operation, it reinforces the seriousness with which the counter-terrorism community treated al-Awlaki, and his ideas.

## Conclusion

The above analysis has provided an articulation of the mechanisms through which IS and the broader jihadist movement have effectively weaponised social media. Through the acceptance of the principles of the strategic and organisational theory of al-Suri, and by benefitting from the popularisation of al-Suri's ideas by al-Awlaki, IS have been able to build a system for the synchronised deployment of content, via social media, that explicitly seeks to inspire individuals to undertake jihadist terrorist attacks in Western jurisdictions. By producing a diversity of content types, in a multitude of languages, IS has been able to mobilise a substantial number of individuals to either make *hijra* or to remain in-country and undertake jihad.

The consequences of this new found capability for domestic counter terrorism are being felt across the Five Eyes, and across continental Europe. The dramatic increase in the number of disconnected, individual jihadist attacks in the period post the declaration of the Caliphate has created a substantial challenge for counter-terrorism agencies, both in the intelligence domain and in law enforcement. The transnational nature of the online environment, the ongoing echo of al-Awlaki, and the ubiquity of social media platforms and connected devices provides an ideal operational environment for this system. The resonance of the conflict in Syria and Iraq, and the re-establishment of a caliphate continues to contribute to a domestic counter-terrorism environment that is likely to worsen before it improves. The digital domain means that the contributions of individuals like al-Awlaki will continue to resonate with those who seek out his content, and that groups such as IS will find benefits in continuing to distribute radicalising content.

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